

The original concept of net neutrality was based on the end-to-end argument, which implies universal and reciprocal access among the users connected to the Internet (Mueller, 2007). Net Neutrality describes a goal that can guide the transition to a broadband Internet (Mueller, 2007). The rules set restrictions on internet service providers that prevent them from prioritizing web traffic and slowing down content. The FCC would also hand oversight of those companies to another agency: the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Undoing net neutrality would mean big changes for how customers access the internet, the plans and services that broadband companies provide, and how web companies reach their consumers.

Net neutrality opened path for healthcare providers to deliver services in innovative ways to hard-to-reach communities. Telehealth services is an innovative way to provide medical diagnosis, care, and treatment remotely. The bipartisan Telehealth Innovation and Improvement Act of 2017 would require Medicare to extend its coverage of telemedicine by expanding the services, types of providers, and geographic regions covered. This would allow Medicare beneficiaries living in and outside of rural areas to receive different types of telemedicine care from the available providers in their communities, even if they are not physicians. Since net neutrality was passed, states have also made significant headway in making telemedicine services available to their residents. Revoking the entire Order could be detrimental to telemedicine since the Commission provided a balanced approach to ensure that vital health information could be considered a specialized service, and potentially not subject to the conduct-based rules. By tipping the scales in favor of ISPs that want a carte blanche to create all sorts of paid prioritization arrangements, it would inevitably impact, if not outright harm, individuals who rely on telemedicine for health services.

If net neutrality is revoked, internet gatekeepers will control both the speed and access to websites and services, including the delivery of vital health information. Without the net neutrality rules, consumer groups and smaller internet companies fear broadband providers could offer faster internet speeds to companies that pay up and slow down those don't or can't pony up. Many fear that powerful carriers will effectively tax innovation and culture by auctioning off a “fast track” and degrading the quality of service (“QoS”) of those who cannot afford it (Pasquale, 2008). A particular concern is that network operators could use discrimination to extract oligopoly rents from upstream markets that are highly competitive (Peha, 2007).

Broadband companies could ask video-streaming giants like Netflix, which have cut into cable profits, to pay big bucks to ensure that their content reaches customers without any interference. But critics also worry that startups and younger companies won't be able to get a foothold if they are forced to pay more to get access to strong streaming or download speeds. Smaller internet service providers and internet startups could be in for a tough time. Without the neutrality rules, the playing field will favor established or dominant companies — such as Charter Communications, which acquired Time Warner Cable, or web giants like Google.

Only established companies will be able to compete in the new environment, with deep pockets to get into internet fast lanes and the money to cut deals for content to package in their data plans. Broadband companies like AT&T, Comcast and Verizon would no longer be regulated by the FCC. FTC lacks the teeth to effectively regulate telecommunications companies in the way the FCC can. Critics point to the challenges of regulating companies that handle vast amounts of consumer data, which they say will be even harder after the repeal earlier this year of internet privacy rules that stemmed from net neutrality.

Repealing net neutrality rules will compromise access to quality and affordable care for vulnerable communities because it will shut them out of a healthcare system moving toward innovation. Tapping into advances in technology relies on consistent and reliable internet access, which is impossible to guarantee if a repeal takes place. If the repeal goes through, health disparities for low-income and communities of color will likely accelerate. Hence, I do not support the notion of Net neutrality repeal.

References:

Mueller, M. 2007. Net Neutrality as Global Principle for Internet Governance. Retrieved from Internet Governance Project www.internetgovernance.org

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